



## **County Executive Steuart Pittman's State of the County Address December 5, 2023**

The state of Anne Arundel County is, by most measures, very strong. Median household income has risen to over \$108,000. People want to live here. Our government agencies are well-run. And for the first time in our history, all three of the major bond rating agencies have awarded us the coveted triple A rating.

But we have a challenge, one that we must confront if our next generation is to live in health and peace.

Our economy's great wealth is no longer being distributed in a way that reduces poverty and stabilizes the middle class. A third of our residents live in what United Way calls Asset Limited, Income-Constrained, Employed. The ALICE population. The folks whose basic monthly expenses exceed income, and who are one or two missed paychecks away from hunger or homelessness.

Nationally, wealth disparities are back up where they were before the New Deal and before the War on Poverty. The top 1% holds the same unsustainable share of national wealth that they held at the start of the Great Depression. The pandemic economy moved more money to the wealthiest Americans, and it didn't trickle down. And that hurt Anne Arundel County.

But our working families are in a moment of opportunity. There are currently more jobs than workers in our county. Unemployment is low, and wages are rising, including for the people who've been left behind.

The business interests that used to support cuts in anti-poverty programs are now asking government to rebuild the workforce, from the bottom up. They are asking for government to invest in housing, childcare, education, transportation, public safety, and health. They want immigration, and they want reentry programs. They can't afford for the economy to leave people behind, because they need people.

Our businesses are right. We must invest in our people, and we must also invest in the hard infrastructure that was neglected over the last forty years - schools, libraries, parks, roads, and even nature.

The state of our county isn't strong because of today's performance metrics. The state of our county is strong because we in Anne Arundel County are building the foundation for our future.

We are building the foundation of healthy people prepared for the 21st century, and we are building the foundation of nature and buildings that can exist in harmony with one another.

So come with me on a journey of the county, starting right here at our Making the Best Place For All mural on the side of the Arundel Center in downtown Annapolis. This is where Budget, Finance, IT, and my staff work.

It's also where our County Council passes the laws that we need to keep up with the times.

And right across the street is People's Park, where residents gather to rally to ensure that I and the County Council can hear their voices.

None of the foundation that we build could happen without the spirit of service that drives our work in this building.

## **HOUSING**

Let's now move out into the communities where the action is, starting with our most complex and urgent challenge: housing that is accessible and affordable for our residents - our families, our workforce, and our seniors.

With the average apartment rent creeping toward \$2,000 a month, and the median single family home selling for \$470,000, nobody can deny that a crisis is brewing.

Our workforce housing bill, our fair housing bill, our accessory dwelling unit bill, and our new Housing Trust Fund were important steps in the right direction. We now have 1,550 affordable units in the pipeline, more than four times the number we had five years ago, including the one being built right here at Brock Bridge Landing for 38 families below 60% of area median income. But we must do more.

Had the County Council passed Senator Pam Beidle's inclusionary zoning bill twenty years ago, we estimate that we'd have another 4,000 units available today for our essential workers - the teachers, nurses, and service industry staff who keep our economy running.

We've brought that bill back as the Essential Worker Housing Access Act, and if it passes, all new developments of over ten units will include homes that are affordable for our workforce.

We will also address the exclusionary zoning laws in our county that prevent builders from constructing the missing middle housing that would help to integrate our neighborhoods and provide opportunity to families that are excluded today.

## **EDUCATION**

No institution has more impact on creating the infrastructure for a sustainable economy than a school system, and ours is on the move.

Lifting students from a childhood of trauma to engagement and economic opportunity requires good staff and good facilities. We're investing in both, and our superintendent, our school board, and county government are in alignment.

The combination of county capital investments and the Board of Education's recently passed redistricting are ending the school overcrowding that previous leaders were unwilling to confront.

To address staffing shortages, we knew heading into this year that we needed to deliver some hefty pay raises, and we got that done in the current budget.

But I want to tell you a story that demonstrates just how able we are to deliver for our kids when we collaborate.

After submitting my budget proposal to the County Council, we saw that neighboring counties were elevating starting teacher pay to aggressively recruit for the coming year. We were being put at a competitive disadvantage, and we needed a plan.

So our Budget Office created a proposal. They found some savings that could be used to bump starting teacher salaries from 19th to among the top 4 in the state, with an \$8,000 raise. Getting it done would require approval from the Board of Education, the teachers' union, and the County Council, in just a matter of days. That's hard, because when you raise salaries at the bottom of the scale, everyone above that also wants a raise, and we couldn't afford that.

Superintendent Mark Bedell got on board first. He went to the Board of Education, we both went to the union, and then the County Council had the final say. It was a yes all around, and that's why our county started the school year with 50% fewer teacher vacancies than last year. And that is progress.

It is essential that our residents elect a new Board of Education in the coming year that will continue this collaborative approach, and reject candidates who are part of the national movement to ban books and bury history.

## **WORKFORCE**

Anne Arundel Workforce Development is the agency of county government that we rely on to connect our people to jobs. It has stepped up to address the staffing shortages in county

agencies and in the private sector, and it's doing the urgent work of preparing our people for jobs with career counseling and training programs where we need them most.

But this is the first year that workforce development has entered our schools. We've invested \$5 million in a team that works inside our middle and high schools to inspire kids with information and experiences about careers, about why school matters, about a future for every child that goes beyond the next exam or textbook.

Establishing career goals in our youth is building the foundation for our future. And we're doing it.

## **CHILDCARE**

Moving deeper into that foundation brings us to childcare. Some families can squeeze those costs into their monthly budgets, but many cannot.

Our Recreation and Parks Department operates 51 wonderful centers at below-market rates, but the need is far greater. We need more private providers.

That's why I asked our Economic Development team to engage with Workforce Development and our Early Childhood Coalition to identify and remove obstacles facing the mostly women entrepreneurs who seek to fill the gap.

Our 200-person September 26th Childcare Summit was a step in the right direction, and our forthcoming executive order will be another.

Building out a sustainable network of quality childcare providers not only allows parents to enter our workforce, but it delivers kindergarten-ready kids to our school system.

That builds the foundation for our future.

## **REENTRY**

We also need for our neighbors who return from incarceration to be welcomed back to our communities and to enter our workforce.

That's why Anne Arundel County is building out its Reentry Hub, right here at Ordnance Road Correctional Center, and working through Community Action Agency on an innovative welcoming program called Turnaround Thursday.

The state has noticed, and we just received two grants totalling almost \$1 million to pursue this work.

## **IMMIGRATION**

The Latino population of our county has doubled in the last twelve years to 10% of our residents and 17% of our students.

Congress's failure to pass comprehensive immigration reform has resulted in many being here without documentation. They keep our service economy afloat, and are the first to lose jobs during crises like COVID, and they live in fear of deportation.

Local government must compensate for the federal government's failures, and welcome our immigrant workers and their families, with support to the organizations that serve them and full access to government services. That's why we've implemented language access plans in all public facing departments and will pursue creation of a multicultural center where people can connect with jobs, education, and services.

## **TRANSPORTATION**

No foundation for a sustainable economy works without safe, efficient, and affordable ways for people to get where they need to be.

We have agreements in place with the state to address the worst car traffic bottlenecks, but must also continue building out our transit, bicycle, and pedestrian infrastructure.

Fare-free, on-demand, and expanded service have increased transit ridership, and we just launched this cool new app that tells you where the buses are and what time they'll get to your stop. It's called Passio GO.

New routes, new electric vehicles, and our planned transit center at Westfield Mall will take us to the next level.

We're also making progress on a connected and complete bike and pedestrian trail system, with progress underway on the South Shore Trail, the Broadneck Trail, and soon the BWI Spur Extension.

And don't discount the potential of transit by sea. Those electric hydrofoil vessels are definitely coming.

## **RECREATION**

There is no better place to unwind in our county than right here at Quiet Waters Park, built 32 years ago and being renovated today.

Public areas for play and exercise, and for experiencing the healing power of nature, don't happen without investment.

Our decision to grow our Rec and Parks capital budget by 70% was deliberate. It's why we are able to add sports fields, make playgrounds accessible, and improve facilities across the county. We currently have 51 projects underway.

Included in that work is doing a better job of stewarding the natural areas under Rec and Parks management. You'll be hearing more soon about how you can help to save the forests and restore the balance of nature in the area where you live.

## **GREEN INFRASTRUCTURE AND RESILIENCE**

When we created our county's first Green Infrastructure Master Plan, we were very deliberate, and serious. The 30% of our land that we will protect for nature - whether planting on small urban parcels or easements on large tracts of farmland and forest - is an investment in biodiversity, clean air, and health.

I'm standing at the Forney Property, adjacent to Bacon Ridge, which is adjacent to our new Crownsville Hospital Memorial Park. These are just a few of the lands that we've protected from development and devoted to nature and public access.

The urgency of this work has grown, as we've come to understand the impacts we face from climate change. With our new Resilience Authority fully engaged in financing this work, more projects that harness the power of nature are coming.

## **GUN VIOLENCE**

We have too many guns in our county. Teenagers have them. People who want to overthrow the government have them. And now in Maryland it's a whole lot easier to get a permit to carry them in public places. And that makes us less safe.

It used to be that local governments had the authority to regulate firearms, but we don't anymore. We do what we can, and in Anne Arundel County we do more than most.

I'm here at the Michael Busch Library where we started giving out these gun locks back in April. Our Department of Health-led Gun Violence Intervention Team has brought these locks to all of our libraries, and more than 3,000 have been distributed.

We're also putting suicide prevention literature in gun stores, educating the public about how to use the red flag law, and have violence interrupters engaged in communities where shootings happen the most.

Our police officers put their lives on the line because the people they serve are armed. That good guy with the gun is a threat to our officers and to the public when he's had too much to drink or he feels he's been wronged.

Our county will continue to lead nationally and innovate locally to reduce gun violence.

## **HEALTH**

The state of our county is also a function of the state of our health and the state of our minds. Government can't fix those things for us, but it's in everyone's interest for government to step in where the free market fails to deliver, like in a pandemic.

Our Department of Health saved thousands of lives during COVID, but never slowed down in its battle against addiction, suicide, and what I would call a mental health crisis.

There aren't enough clinicians or facilities. But the ones we have must be supported.

That's why we're supporting and expanding our Crisis Response System and our Systems of Care. When Arundel Lodge's new Behavioral Health Urgent Care Center at Luminis Hospital was denied an expected federal grant, we stepped in to keep them operating.

Our mental health is the foundation for each of us, and it's also a foundation for the future of our county.

## **BUSINESS REGULATION**

Government has a way of making rules to solve problems, but when the problems go away the rules remain. We must constantly assess the regulations that restrict our residents and our businesses, to ensure that the intended public benefit actually exists and is worth the cost.

This year we've made it easier to do business in our county by updating our school APF law to allow housing where we need it, and we've removed restrictions requiring retail development when there's no market for it. Our bill that incentivizes redevelopment removes regulatory obstacles, and the long-awaited full rewrite of our land use code is coming.

But we're also changing the way business is done in our regulatory agencies. The Land Use Navigator creates the transparency, accountability, and efficiency that businesses have been asking for, and our employees are delivering outstanding customer service.

## **AGRICULTURE**

Our county has lost most of its farmland in recent decades, and it's time to stop losing it. Saving this Lothian Grain Elevator after Perdue shut it down may have been the most impactful local government action to keep farms commercially viable in the history of our county, but it's not enough.

Our Office of Emergency Management, Planning and Zoning, Economic Development, and our new Food Council are all in to preserve more farmland, produce more healthy local food, help farmers navigate regulations, and bring a new generation into the business.

Farms are a foundation for our future.

## **RIVER DAYS**

Public Water Access isn't just about boat ramps. It's also about getting more people on the water. We launched Anne Arundel River Days this year and drew thousands to festivals on the water with live music, educational programming, and free boat rides. These events will continue and grow, because the young people who fall in love with our waters today are the foundation of our campaign to restore them.

## **CROWNSVILLE**

The transformation of Crownsville Hospital Center, this tainted jewel at the heart of our county, is underway.

Our first Crownsville Town Hall was filled with the spirit of healing, the Nonprofit Center is coming together, and the Crownsville Hospital Memorial Park is in design.

State and federal funds will assist us as we and our partners lead the country in treating mental health on sacred ground.

## **CONCLUSION**

All of these initiatives build the foundation for our future, but so is the very fabric of County Government.

The Departments of Public Works, Inspections and Permits, Aging and Disabilities, Recreation and Parks. Police, Fire, Detention, Health, Social Services, Finance, Budget, Personnel. There's Emergency Management, Central Services, Law, Planning and Zoning, Community Development, and Information Technology. And Transportation, Resilience Authority, and the Partnership for Children, Youth, and Families.

All have basic responsibilities to our residents, and each delivers a service every day.

Despite staffing shortages, the work is getting done, and that is because we have well managed institutions with a workforce of people who believe in service.

If you want to help build the foundation for the future of your county, please get to know county government at our recently reorganized web site - [aacounty.org](http://aacounty.org).



You can participate through a board or commission, apply for a county job, or influence government from the outside through community organizing.

Whatever you do, please remember always that we are a community with shared dreams, shared resources, and opportunities every day to make life better for our neighbors.

So thank you for helping to make Anne Arundel County The Best Place - For All.